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ABSTRACT

The following pointers are made for agencies providing opportunities for risk-taking recreation: (1) there are individual differences and distinct motivations for various levels of risk expression; (2) actual (objective) risk should be finely calculated; (3) agencies need not necessarily provide actual high-risk activities to satisfy a desire for risk-taking; (4) a given activity will not be evaluated as risky or hazardous by all individuals; (5) individual differences and changes occur as participants become more proficient at an activity; and (6) factors other than the programs, activities, and people may determine the adequacy or success of an adventure program in accomplishing its goals. An analysis of the psychology of risk recreation is presented in this paper prior to the concluding admonitions. (JD)

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SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES OF RISK RECREATION

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Much attention has focused recently on the rising numbers of participants in an expanding variety of high adventure leisure pursuits. Risk recreation is often the term used to describe such activities.

While recreation professionals in the public sector have become aware of the growing demand for adventure or risk type recreation activities, they remain somewhat reluctant to sponsor them. This reluctance is grounded in several factors, including worry over potential liability problems, the limited number of qualified activity leaders, misunderstanding about the extent of danger or actual risk involved in specific adventure activities and a general lack of knowledge regarding the needs, values and purposes of high adventure programs.

The term risk recreation bears many connotations, individuals differ in their judgements of whether or not an activity is in some way threatening. Nevertheless, risk recreation may be conceptualized with some general understanding. Risk recreation consists of those activities which, to the participant, provide risk, challenge, or hazard. When we combine the terms risk and recreation, we most likely visualize a wide variety of leisure pursuits which involve exposure to physical danger. Some activities spring to mind immediately -- hang gliding, skydiving, rock climbing, snowmobiling, dirt biking, ski mountaineering or, in another culture, bullfighting.

It should be pointed out, however, that risk may be thought of in different ways, including uncertainty, the probability of various outcomes, failure, or personal injury. We must therefore be cautious about lumping a group of activities together under the rubric risk recreation, especially if we then assume that these activities have other characteristics in common.

A related caution involves terms such as risk-taking, sensation-seeking, and stress-seeking, which are often used synonymously in their application to recreation. These terms imply somewhat different approaches to the study of recreation behavior, and stem from diverse theoretical and methodological backgrounds. Without delving into the assumptions and methods of each, let us simply say that when one refers to risk recreation (or develops similar classifications), one should have a preconceived basis for doing so, and accurately define all terms. For expediency, the term risk recreation is used in this talk; the limitations of this conceptualization, however, should be kept in mind.

CONCEPTS OF RISK RECREATION

I'd like to present three basic concepts related to risk recreation which are drawn from empirical research. These principles bear implications for the recreation researcher and practioner alike. Much of the research from which these concepts are garnered was not directed at the phenomenon of risk recreation per se, but was conducted by psychologists and other social scientists to gain a better understanding of human behavior under stress, or in specialized settings. Many of these investigations were carried out in extended series of experiments, unlike many current one-shot case studies of risk recreation. Although the three concepts (from the many which could have been chosen) are presented separately, it is quickly seen that they are closely interrelated.

Concept 1. Knowing how an individual evaluates or perceives a recreation activity may be more important than simply knowing about the activity.

In order to understand risk recreation, we must consider individual differences. Individuals may vary greatly in how they view and respond to the stresses in a given activity. To some, for example, backpacking is an extremely hazardous high-risk prospect; it requires travelling through wilderness, carrying all of one's own possessions, and dealing with snakes, bears and other wild creatures. Some people may be attracted to backpacking -- attracted by the very reasons which lead others to avoid it.

A notion related to perceived (or subjective) risk is actual (or objective) risk, where risk is taken to mean the likelihood of injury. It is possible to calculate the number of injuries per 1,000 participants (or 1,000 hours, etc.) for a given activity, and thus obtain a measure of objective risk. Some activities which are actually quite hazardous may be viewed as relatively safe; conversely, the objective risk may be relatively low (as in skydiving) but the activity perceived as high-risk. Factors influencing this evaluation include the consequences of errors or mistakes while engaged in the activity; the results can be tragic, obviously, in a sport such as skydiving.

The idea that an individual's evaluation of an activity may be of greater interest than the activity itself is supported by the findings of researchers who studied paratrooper trainees in the Norwegian military. In Psychobiology of stress, they stated,"It appears that it is not just the stimuli or physical environment per se that determines the physiological response, but the individual's evaluation of these stimuli."[1] In the same volume, the authors put it a different way: "The general

conclusion from the study of the physiological variables was that it was not the physical situation itself that determined the physiological response."[2] For the paratroopers, evaluation of the situation determined their reactions (and patterns of coping with stress), even more than their actual performance while jumping. Several psychological variables, including defense mechanisms, were crucial determinants of how the situation was perceived.

The idea that an individual's appraisal of a situation can be more important than the situation is, of course, not limited in application to the present topic. One person's meat is another's posion, and it should not be surprising that some people regularly pursue recreation activities which others view with constant horror and amazement.

Concept 2. The reasons why people initially participate in risk recreation activities may not be the same ones which maintain participation.

The changes occurring when individuals continue to participate in a risk activity (and pass from the novice to expert stage) may be subtle yet highly significant determinants of their recreation behavior. Such changes involve far more than an increase in skill or ability.

It's often possible to distinguish between motivational factors which stimulate involvement, and those which sustain interest. For instance, people may initailly seek status stemming from risk recreation participation, but later learn of other rewards, and even shun external praise.[3] Some individuals might first be attracted by the novelty of a sport such as hang gliding. The novelty eventually wears off, but participation may be sustained by other aspects such as intensity, complexity, or uncertainty. This idea is rooted in theories of optimal arousal.

Several psychologists have suggested that individuals have different optimal levels of arousal, which are sought and experienced to prevent boredom and insure adequate (and pleasant) functioning. People having high optimal levels of arousal may well seek the stimulation of unconventional forms of recreation, and be attracted by and thrive on inherent challenges and risks.

Zuckerman[4] has proposed sensation-seeking as a motive, one component of which is a preference for thrill and adventure through recreation. Studies have found correlations between sensation-seeking and participation in risk recreation, but more work is needed to clarify this relationship.[5]

The changes which may accompany the movement from novice to expert standing in risk activities, however, are not limited to those dealing with motivation. In 15 years of research on recreational skydiving, Fenz and Epstein[6] determined, among other things, that novices utilized different psychological defenses than experts in coping with the stresses of their sport. We have already shown that defense mechanisms affect an individual's perception of a situation and, as brought out in Concept 1, this perception is a crucial component of the activity.

Fenz and Epstein found that novice skydivers' level of fear peaked just before jumping, while experts' fear peaked much earlier on the day of the scheduled jump. Having already coped with their fear, experts were less aroused at jump time. Novices, on the other hand, became most aroused immediately before leaving the plane, a condition having some advantages, but which may also inhibit clear thinking and appropriate action, or distort one's evaluation of risk.

This concept reinforces the point that risk recreation should not be considered a static activity, but viewed in a developmental perspective.

Face-to-face leaders of risk recreation programs, experts in the activity will exhibit levels of skill superior to those of program participants or clients. But leader and follower will likely differ in many other respects as well, including perceptions of risk, perhaps, or defense mechanisms. If leaders are not aware of these often-subtle, yet important differences, there could be a gap in their understanding of the participants. Such a gap could conceivably result in unclear communications, misunderstandings, or faulty assumptions leading to costly accidents.

Concept 3. Factors other than the individual and activity involved may play important roles in risk recreation behavior.

It could be said that to learn about how people play, you look at how they work (or the reverse--to understand work, study play). Extending beyond the work-play relationship, this concept emphasizes the value of placing risk-taking recreational behavior in a broader context, and using ecological frameworks.

One might expect a close relationship between work and play, for, after all, the same individual does both. But does the individual work and play with the same social groups? In the same environment? With the same attitudes, feelings and dispositions? And for the same reasons? Probably not, and any of these factors may determine differences between work and play behaviors.

Exploring the work-play relationship may be quite useful if the two are compared on a single dimension--one such as risk. Klein[7] studied risk taking, injury, and self-expression among snowmobilers in Michigan. He found that work and lifestyle, in part, determined recreational risk-taking; the snowmobilers most prone to injury were those who felt they

were in dead-end jobs. Klein concluded that when people do not have the chance for self-expression, mastery or risk-taking in their occupations, they turn to recreation to satisfy these needs, and often exhibit these valued behaviors to a dangerous extreme.

Klein is thus proposing, as have others, a compensatory function of recreation or play. These theories comprise only a few of those proposed to explain play behavior, and must therefore be interpreted with caution. Consider, for instance, the sensation-seeking motive or personality trait mentioned earlier. From this, one would assume that a sensation-seeker would prefer stimulating work and stimulating play; perhaps this and other variables mediate the work/play relationship.

In cases where occupations are not pertinent (as in youth adventure programs), insight may be gained by studying home life, schooling, and other behaviors outside the realm of recreation. Further research may clarify which of these variables are salient in understanding someone's reactions to and approach or avoidance of risk activities. This knowledge would then be applicable to adventure programs, in terms of selection of participants, teaching designs, and critical factors of which adventure group leaders should be aware. There is evidence, for example, that risk-taking may be influenced by birth order[8]; other individual characteristics, we have seen, may also be of interest.

Conclusions

Many researchers and social commentators in a variety of fields have suggested that people need to take risks above and beyond those encountered in day-to-day living. In providing opportunities for recreational risk-taking, agencies should keep several things in mind: 1) There are individual differences and distinct motivations for various levels of risk expression; 2) When considering the merits of sponsoring

adventure programs, the actual (objective) risk should be calculated as best as possible; 3) Since subjective and objective estimates of risk often differ, agencies need not necessarily provide actual high-risk activities to satisfy a desire for risk-taking; 4) Agencies should not assume that a given activity will be evaluated as risky or hazardous by all individuals; 5) Leaders of adventure programs should be aware of individual differences and changes occurring as participants gain proficiency; 6) Factors other than the programs, activities and people may determine the adequacy or success of the adventure program in accomplishing its goals and objectives; 7) Additional research is needed to determine which aspects of risk recreation are the most popular, which are the most needed, which are most subject to individual differences, and what actual benefits are derived from participation. These aspects, and the three concepts, may be of differential value for different risk recreation activities; a wide range of activities and participants should be sampled. Further research can only help adventure recreation programs, as well as provide insight into the risk recreation phenomenon and a fascinating arena of human behavior.

Footnotes

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2. Op. Cit. p. 125.

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